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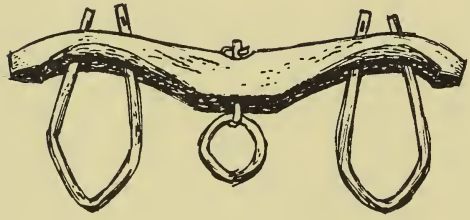
The Meaning of Abraham Lincoln.

LINCOLN ROOM



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THE MEANING
of
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

BY

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First Congregational Church
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"The Spirit of man is the candle of the Lord"
Proverbs XX 27

THE MEANING OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Scripture places an exceedingly high estimate upon man. He is posessed with a spirit, which distinguishes him from all other creatures and makes him a possible instrument of God. God through man is illuminating the world, and the deep dark vistas of existance itself.

This can be said of every man, to some degree. Every man possesses the life of the spirit. Every man has a definite place in God's eternal plan and may be used for God's highest ends. There is a light which lighteth every man coming into the world and there is a iight which every man may shed upon the world.

But this doctrine has peculiar application to the great man. In a genius we see our better selves magnified to the proportions we should like to attain. The spark pays homage to the candle, not because it is so different in nature but because it has a higher degree of illuminating power. Even stars differ in glory by reason of a relative, not an absolute difference, of brilliancy.

The text has a unique application to Abraham Lincoln, who like a meteor grows brighter, as his life course across the back ground of history is viewed. There is a growing luster to his character even as year by year he recedes into the past.

We appreciate that he was one of us; that he also transcended us, and that he has been a light unto the farthest and darkest corners of our humanity. I would like this morning to estimate Lincoln from certain points of view that the world ever tries to evaluate its heroes. For since the dawn of history men have been bewildered in accounting for their geniuses — great soldiers like Alexander, great artists like Phidias, great poets like Homer, or great poets like Homer, or great seers like Moses. The great man has always seemed to demand a special theory as to his origin, his development, and his outstanding achievements.

First there is the philosophy that Lincoln is merely the product of his times. Here is the mechanical and environmental theory of genius. If there is any credit to be awarded, the outer world or society is to have it all. This theory sees a great man as so much wax. He is rolled and moulded by forces entirely outside of himself as a candle is shaped from the tallow. Blind chance too, is brought into play.

"Yes, there is luck in most things
and in none
More than in being born
in the right time"

Lincoln was born in America and that was in itself a guarantee of opportunity. He was born in a log cabin, and romance loves to find its heroes in lowly places, as Pharoh's daughter found Moses in the bulrushes. Then the conclusion seems inevitable; it was the bulrushes or the cabin that made the man! Lincoln had little schooling. So much the better, say the advocates of this theory. College only spoils a man any way, Lincoln was born to hardship,

"Ah," they say, "there is his secret! The wilderness made him. It breathed the spirit of freedom into his soul. It disciplined him in patience and taught him first to rule himself before he could command a political convention". And so this school of opinion would carry its argument from one level to another but always emphasizing the force of circumstance. Opportunity made Lincoln; the democracy of America made him, or the crisis of the Civil War produced him. Candles, lamps, electric bulbs, mercury tubes are all different agents for producing light. They are simply products of man's inventive skill in different ages. The candle itself gets no credit, but only the society that produces the candle or the environment in which the candle shines. Post Revolutionary conditions in Kentucky brought him into the world; the Civil War elevated him because some one must lead and a sentimental democracy perpetuates his name! Thus iconoclasm attempts to account for a great man. It is this standard of measurement that permeates some of the little biographies of

great souls. If a great man has any glory it is all like that of the moon in its power to reflect a borrowed light; mere chance determines why one rather than another reflector was chosen and used.

But Lincoln was more than a mere product of his times. He was a representative of his age. The candle does something more than shine. It possesses illumination and by possession represents a light that ultimately comes from the sun. The candle concentrates light and from its beams one may learn the principles of all light.

Illinois in 1861 was the most truly representative part of the United States. There was the West, with its traditional ideals of liberty. Into this West was pouring a stream from the East; bearing with it the Puritan conscience of New England. But there was in all this something of the South. Lincoln himself was a southerner by birth. He loved his southern folks. He mingled with southern men who came up the Mississippi. He went to New Orleans, where he met southern opinions in their native haunts, and southern institutions on their own soil. He could say he would hit slavery hard but he also recognized property rights in slavery that might be honorably and peaceably negotiated.

"Who represents America?" had been a problem in our politics from the beginning. Was it Adams of Massachusetts or Washington of Virginia? After the revolution it was a question as to whether it was Hamilton of New York with his federal theories of government, or was it Thomas Jefferson

of Virginia with his guardianship over the rights of the States? And down to the election of 1928, the problem of the representative man was before the American people; was he to be found in New York or in California?

For a time preceeding the Civil War it was not clear who the representative man was.

New England had her colossal Webster who had failed to find a formula which would command the assent of the nation. Kentucky had her Calhoun with his "Iron Logic" and Illinois had a masterful mind in Stephen A. Douglas, all known to fame before the railsplitter came to public notice.

But after the Lincoln Douglas debates there was no longer any doubt as to whose torch burned the steadiest and with the least smoke of fallacious argument. It became very evident that Lincoln's thoughts were the thoughts of the majority of the nation. In his mind flowed the main current of public opinion, as the Mississippi gathers its waters from the various points of the compass.

It is needless to say that Lincoln was a politician. He was. Tom Platt in his palmiest days, carrying New York State in his vest pocket, could have taught Lincoln nothing in handling men. Stephen A. Douglas, that master of political oratory was matched by Lincoln in an ability to advocate a great cause with not always the most apt or most logical reasons. But Lincoln's

main purpose was sound and compelling. "A house divided against itself cannot stand." The cause of the Union transcended all other issues. This was the passion of his soul. And in this he represented the forces of which he inevitably became the center.

But with all this we have not entirely accounted for Lincoln. There was many another man in the United States in 1861 who felt just as did he. Seward could have repeated much of Lincoln's philosophy verbatim and enthusiastically. But Seward was not chosen to be President. Lincoln was chosen not only because he was a representative but a creative leader. He had to be ahead of the people he tried to direct. A candle has power to reveal a path in which men shall go. It sheds light on obstacles to be surmounted. In the mysteries of Divine Providence it is literally true that "The Spirit of man is the candle of the Lord". The analytical power of Lincoln's reason, the glow of charity in his heart, the prophetic power in his vision and the consecration of his spirit were to be as beacon lights unto his people in the four terrible years of civil strife.

On taking up his presidential duties in Washington he found disloyalty rampant. Men would accept office one day swearing fealty to the union and then resign the next day out of sympathy with the south. Mr. Lincoln said the situation reminded him of a man trying to shovel fleas across a barn floor. Into his cabinet he gathered a group of strong cultivated men, every one of whom thought he had a better right to the

presidential chair than had its occupant. How Mr. Lincoln held those men, moulded them to his will, nad ultimately commanded their respect as well as their loyalty is a story in American history never to be forgotten.

One day President Lincoln was informed that Secretary Seward had called him a blank blank fool. He listened attentively while looking wistfully out of the window. Then he said, "Did Seward call me a blank blank fool? Well, then, I must be a blank blank fool for Seward is nearly always right. I'll just run over and see Seward about it." How he refused to make an issue with Europe at a critical time; how he tried out one general after another until Grant was found; how he held back the forces of the abolitionist who wanted emancipation declared immediately; how he took the terrible lashings of his critics who should have been more sympathetic with his program; how he worked and waited and watched and prayed until his policy was vindicated by results constitutes the main thread of American history from 1861 -1865.

It was the genius of Lincoln, a man of destiny shaping the very pillars of history even as he had shaped the logs for his humble home in Illinois.

Thomas Carlyle called the American Civil war the burning of a dirty chimney; but Carlyle needed a long backward look to see accurately. Scanning the past centuries he could estimate justly, Mohammet and Cromwell as no one had done before, but he was too close to the events to appreciate the

flame of idealism in the issues of the American chimney, and the pure high flame of prophetic vision that burned in Lincoln's soul.

James Russell Lowel gives Lincoln his true place among the immortals of history.

> "Great Captains with their guns and drums
> Disturb our judgements for the hour,
> But a tlast silence comes
> These all are gone and standing like a tower,
> Our children shall behold his fame,
> The kindly earnest, brave forseeing man,
> Sagacious, patient, dreading praise not blame
> New birth of our new soil, the first American."

Identified with the humblest of us, transcending the best of us, he lead us by the genius of his mind and the warmth of his heart, that bore

"Malice toward none, and charity for all"

Truly his spirit was the very candle of God.

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